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The book as a means of communicating ideas

'Ksiazka jako sposób przekazywania mysli' ['The book as a means of communicating ideas']. Published 1946, in: *Nowa Polska / New Poland Monthly* [bibl. 109].

Nowa Polska was a monthly Polish-language journal published in London. This article was written at the suggestion of its cultural editor, Stefan Themerson. (Themerson told the story that the article was long in coming, and that finally he locked AF in a room until it was written.)

Stefan Themerson then translated AF's text into Polish. The original English text has been lost, and the present text is a translation out of the published Polish version.

Printing and the war

The war forced the British printing trade to save; to save paper, to save labour, and also to save in the areas of printing that involved experiment.

This saving and rationing led to a certain kind of consolidation of not only the old publishing *firms*, but also the old publishing *forms*; new ideas could not overcome all of the new difficulties brought about by the war. New ideas usually lack money, as much as old ideas lack content. Moreover, during the war, new ideas suffered from a shortage of new workplaces because the allocation of paper (although not an allocation of skilled workers) was shared between those printers, publishers and owners who had registered not later than May 1940. New publishers did not receive paper and it was forbidden to set up new publications. Thus, in spite of some exceptions, it was hard for a new idea to obtain financial or intellectual support: the rule of 'stonewall publishers', who did not take financial risks, dominated in a behaviourist society.

Traditionalism

Thus, one of the consequences of this paper rationing was the strengthening of publishing tradition. In order to save paper and the work of a typesetter, the Publishers' Association established certain technical conventions in publishing: narrower margins, smaller type, starting a new chapter immediately after the previous one, limited number of preliminary pages, the design of type to be as simple as possible. Paper factories produced lighter paper and books grew thinner. On the whole, these savings did not cause a fall in the quality of printing. In reality those publishers and printers renowned for immaculate printing, beautiful paper and bindings, could not sustain production at the old level. Mediocre publishers, however, began to produce books better than ever before, because the 'rules on saving' were devised by printers and typographers of some distinction. Thus all publishers approached a common satisfactory standard of production.

The words 'common satisfactory standard of production' already imply that production was traditionalist. However, a generally satisfactory standard of traditionalism requires something more than satisfactory tradition, wholly or partly thanks to

a satisfactorily large number of satisfactorily good typographers – the standard of traditionalism also demands constantly up-to-date experiment. Such experiment often appears to be anti-traditional, as the satisfactorily large self-satisfied majority seems to take as tradition that which comprises only certain formal manifestations of tradition: symmetrical layout, type of a certain design, elaborate initial letters, etc. Tradition, however, is not a collection of manifestations; it is good or bad health, but not a collection of symptoms of good or bad health. An experiment may go against the symptoms. But an experiment is not a contradiction of tradition. Experiment is a penetration of the tradition and a search for its requirements.

New form

I have given this problem so much space because, in my view, during the next few decades a new form of communication of ideas will evolve and it will be as revolutionary as was the introduction of musical notation, or film. This new form will not be concerned with matters such as the formal manifestations of the traditional position. It may and it probably will fight these manifestations as manifestations; however, its main aim will be an attempt to solve certain problems which are so simple that they are often not considered to be problems at all.

For example: why is a word a word, and not just an arithmetic sum of the shapes and sounds belonging to the letters out of which it is made? and what has this got in common with the fact that since the times of Galileo and later Descartes (but not after Einstein), philosophy was based more on summation than totality? and is not this why printing – this first example of paleotechnic standardization – produces words by summation of single letters? what effect has a word (perceived as a totality) on each of the letters from which it is made? why do some letters seem to vanish in a word and, if so, why are they printed in the same weight as other letters which bear more meaning? why are words given shapes which have little in common with their pronounciation? and indeed, why are the letters of the alphabet arranged in the existing order of a, b, c…z? and is not this why z is less 'known' than a, than b and than c?

The history of printing is similar to the history of all cultural pseudomorphs.[1] The original words of the author were registered according to the convention which postulated that, using (about) twenty-six letters, it is possible to produce an isomorphic equivalent of the writer's idea.[2] It was forgotten, however, that when using print it was possible to convey the author's idea only as far as the printed word would allow, not the word itself. Spoken words can be modified by the writer through vocal changes; printed words are modified so that the reader imagines the intonations

1
'Pseudomorph' (literally): a mineral, which has taken the place of another mineral, retaining its outside appearance. In excavations we often find that particles of animals or plants have been replaced, molecule for molecule, with a mineral substance that retains partially or completely its shape and structure. A musical notation of a note or a printed word is here termed a cultural pseudomorph of the appropriate musical tone or spoken word. [Ed.]

2
'Isomorphic' (in chemistry): two substances are described as isomorphic if their crystallic structure and chemical content are similar. [Ed.]

of the writer. However, it would be a truism to remind ourselves that we do not know one another so well as to be sure of the intonation that accompanies the texts that we read.

So far, in only a few cases have writers been tempted to do more than just give their ideas a form such that they can be immediately transformed into twenty-six printed symbols. Very rarely has it occurred to writers that something more was needed to express their ideas. A hundred years ago, William Blake had to engrave his own plates, in order to give his ideas an isomorphic equivalent; he was not satisfied with the same, unchangeable shapes of individual characters. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Apollinaire thought that he had to break away from the existing symbolic symptoms and compose his own graphic configurations, in order to give the ideas of his poems an isomorphic equivalent; the traditional typographic form of a verse was not sufficient.

Thus, new forms are created not only as a result of systematic scientific investigations in the field of the psychology of perception; they are also created thanks to the artist who has this irritating tendency to solve many problems long before the scientist or ordinary mortal thinks about posing the problem in the first place. The solutions given by the artist are nevertheless intuitive; the artist is not conscious of the problem or the solution. And, perhaps, the solutions for which we search today already exist on canvas; our eyes, however, do not perceive them yet as 'forms'.

Problems in fields such as positivistic logic, the structure of language, the method of expressing mathematical truths, required a specific symbolism that is their isomorphic equivalent; and those isomorphic equivalents in turn influenced the development of the same ideas which brought them about in the first place. Mathematics needed a symbol to denominate an empty space on an abacus. As soon as the symbol o was proposed and accepted, it being an isomorphic equivalent of the empty space, the symbol in turn influenced not only the development of mathematics but also the development of civilization.

Indeed, not only a new book and a new form is required – a new writer is also needed.

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On typography

Untitled manuscript written in 1947, previously unpublished.

The manuscript is written in ink on hand-made paper: the work of a scribe, exploring modern ideas with old means of production. Though presumably a fair copy of previous drafts, it is nevertheless a virtuoso piece of handwork, but done quickly. It is headed '10 11 July 1947 1 am', and concludes '5 am'.

This is one of a number of writings on these themes from this time. AF had by then started to print in London, before setting up as a full-time printer in Cornwall.

Based on the work of earlier inscription cutters & scribes, the first printers attempted to produce exact facsimiles of manuscript books; but facsimiles capable of production in greater quantity and with more speed & accuracy. Both the aesthetic & epistemological patterns of the fifteenth-century book were expropriated by the lettercutters & typefounders & compositors & pressmen. In the related technics of papermaking & inkmaking & binding, the new printers eventually assumed prominence as customers, though not without the eventual reaction of a variant of Gresham's Law.

But early standards were high: due not only to the demands of any competitor in a field where the object to be displaced is lovely, but also to the inherent human desire, then not discouraged by society, to do responsible work as well as possible.

As is general when an already formulated entity, such as a book, is first mass produced, the object to be made is attempted & considered as a complete entity; not examined nor modified except so far as the limitations of the technic require. The book has therefore not changed or developed to any degree since the invention of printing: the technic reached its finest achievements in the first hundred years of its development, and the later history of printing has been a history of technical development in machinery and sociological depression in aesthetics. As a geological fault reveals the history & biology of the earth as a fixed pseudomorph, the book is a cultural pseudomorph of the society & aesthetics of its environment.

But in this matrix, the world of Gutenberg & Coster & Faust & Schoeffer, obtained certain beliefs & visual patterns & solutions which were not less primary for being implicit & unformulated. The book, as it has been modified over five hundred years, is based on these conventions, themselves imitated from the antecedent manuscript.

Before inorganic records were made, human thought was communicated from mouth to ear to brain to mouth, individual to individual. Speaker and hearer were participators in a process of mutual interaction and conscious & unconscious modification of ideas: the creator was the community, the created thing organic, subject to mutation from generation to generation.